

Design On Demand

By Angelo Ragaza

When you were just starting out, it was easy to furnish your rented studio by raiding your parents' attic and making a quick trip to Ikea. But now that you're in a higher tax bracket, it's not enough to buy your own home or apartment--you need to have it decorated too.

The problem is that most people don't have the time to worry about swatches or deciding what to put in a breakfast nook. So unless you already know the difference between chintz and toile, you need the help of a professional decorator. The question is where to find one.

Since Designer Previews opened in New York in 1985, snagging the services of a world-class designer--or catching young talents on their way up--has become much easier. Now, at the nexus between sophisticated clients

who can afford a home fit for royalty and designers who, in their field, pretty much are royalty, she's that most rarefied of matchmakers. She puts people who can afford renovation and decoration jobs averaging from \$250,000 to \$400,000 face-to-face with designers who won't work for less than that.

But for Fisher, the interior design process is more than a big transaction. "It's very intimate," she says. "Trust, personality, taste and money: These are all major factors. They're the same things that keep marriages together or split them apart."

Tips for finding the right decorator

Be realistic about your budget.

Compare work and contracts of several designers before making your choice.

If you're using an architect, make sure the decorator is involved early on.

Make sure a decorator's personal style matches your own.

Never hire a decorator without seeing their work, checking references and reading the contract.

For a process that can be fraught with unexpected surprises, Fisher's process is stunningly simple. For

\$250.00, like a skilled therapist, will prod you gently for information about your taste, your personality, your lifestyle, what you want from your home and what you can afford to spend.

Then she puts on a slide show that's a cross between a Rorschach test and a whirlwind tour of the inner sanctums of the rich and famous. There are living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens and dining areas, with the looks spanning the range from contemporary to traditional and every shade in between. Fisher notes which images elicit polite compliments--there isn't an ugly room in the bunch--and those that get euphoric whoops. That's her cue to pull out a book or two of designers who match a client's "look" and price range.

Indeed, fine craftsmanship is the great democratizing factor in design--Fisher has warned many a millionaire that even they can't buy haste. "If you have \$5 million to spend, maybe you can have anything you want," Fisher says. "Just not at the drop of a hat."